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ABSTRACT

A critical analysis of the quadrennial ministry studies within Methodism over the years is presented. The 1944 and 1948 ministry studies were sociological and demographic. A 1952 study was the first try by the Methodist Church to work on definitions and theological understanding of the ministry. In 1960, there was a study of ministry and a subsequent report to the General Conference plus an important publication of papers from a consultation of Methodist theological faculties. In 1964, a study of the ministry in the light of historic Christianity (to clarify church doctrine in relation to ministry) reported that the concept of an ordained laity was indefensible yet recognized the Methodist Church had an ordained laity. It was not accepted by the General Conference. A 1968 report to the General Conference tied together the concepts of ministry, the sacraments, and ordination. It was adopted by the legislative committee. A 1976 report marked a shift in the church's view of ministry, highlighting the concepts of general and representative ministry. By 1980, the reports moved more away from traditional conceptualizations of ministry, ordination, and even sacraments, with a radical proposal for a new order of diaconal minister. A committee reporting to the 1988 General Conference studied the meaning of ordination, the relationship of ordination to the sacraments, the meaning of itinerancy, the nature of conference membership, and the possibility of a permanent diaconate. Currently the committee plans to present a tentative report and ask for continued study. Several guidelines for helping deal with basic issues are presented. (SM)

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No. 76, September 1, 1988

A Critical Analysis of the Ministry Studies since 1944

by Richard P. Heitzenrater

The quadrennial ministry studies within Methodism during the last two generations present an interesting illustration of denominational identity crisis. When asked to analyze these studies and present a report to a special gathering of the European Theological Study Commission, I hesitated to approach a task that seemed outside my area of scholarly expertise. Let me simply say from the outset that I have analyzed these reports from my dual perspective as a Wesleyan historian and as an ordained United Methodist minister of the Western Pennsylvania Conference. I have never been to General Conference—that may help explain some of my statements. My comments may offend some people—that does not change my sentiments or alter my conclusions.

The first two ministry studies in The Methodist Church were in 1944 and 1948. They were essentially sociological and demographic studies of ministry in the Methodist Church, written by Murray Leiffer at Garrett.[1] He attempted to analyze the state of Methodist ministry at that time in order to improve the church's role in recruitment, training, deployment and retirement.

The 1952 study is the first major attempt by The Methodist Church to deal with definitions and, to some extent, theological understanding of ministry.[2] In the 1952 study, the commission was asked to examine the ministry of the church in all of its orders and offices. To that commission were referred all matters concerning the ministry of the church, including the non-concurrent matters from the Committee on Ministry of the General Conference of 1948. Here we see one of the problems that faces any committee charged with studying the ministry. Part of their charge is to gather up the loose ends left over from the previous General Conference. The report of 1952 tried to explain that a Methodist concept of ministry represented a middle ground between sacerdotal and evangelical concepts of orders. It explained the concept in this way: an *order* has carried historically the idea of a supernatural

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endowment bestowed on the candidate by one who performs the ordination ceremony. An *office*, on the other hand, suggests an ecclesiastical status, granted to one who has demonstrated he has the spiritual gifts to perform a certain *function* in the church. Two distinctions emerge here: first, between divine origin and human origin; second, between performing duties correlative to ordination and performing other functions in the church. The point of the report (and of those definitions) was summarized by the statement, "We must not in any way despise or discount the divine meaning of ordination" (p. 4). At the same time, the report recognized that American Methodism tended to make admission on trial and acceptance into full membership in conference more important than ordination (p. 5). It also had addressed the question of the relationship between ordination and sacraments. This issue had first arisen in the act of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in 1926, which adopted legislation permitting unordained supply pastors to administer the sacraments within the bounds of their own parish. The uniting conference of 1939 adopted this practice. In an attempt to deal with the seeming incongruity of the situation, however, the 1948 conference had "reaffirmed the historic position of Methodism" and made it unlawful for unordained ministers to administer the sacrament of holy communion. But the 1948 conference went on to state that a bishop *may* give unordained pastors permission to do baptism and marriage in the parish where the law of the state permits.

The Conference in 1952 was very concerned (as was the report of the Study Committee) about the relationship between ordination and administration of the sacraments. It tried to hold a hard line on the matter and presumed that any practical problem of short supply of ordained ministers would be solved in the coming years through recruiting and training an increased number of ordained ministers (pp. 8–13).

The 1956 report of the Study Commission on Theological Education was primarily concerned with the support of theological schools;[3] it tried to continue the increase of ministry and proper training of ministry through an emphasis on numbers and deployment of seminaries in the United States. Following the recommendations in this report, the General Conference established two new seminaries (one in Ohio and one in Kansas City), relocated one to Washington (Wesley), and relocated Claremont in California. The tone of the conference relative to the matter of education and training is perhaps best summarized by a statement by Bishop Cannon who said, "As we promote our theological education, we promote the church and we bring the Kingdom of God a little nearer to realization on earth." Further, he said, "If we support this program and then go on to bigger programs, generations yet unborn will rise up and call this General Conference blessed."[4]

The 1960 Study of Ministry, as well as its report to General Conference, is not really as significant as the publication in 1960 of a series of papers from a consultation the previous year of Methodist theological faculties, published as *The Ministry in the Methodist Heritage* and edited by Gerald McCulloh.[5] Several concerns, indicative of the issues of the times, are evident in that publication. Here we begin seeing reflections upon the phrase, "the priesthood of the laity" (p. 54), and that phraseology raises the question of terminology. When we talk about the ministry of the laity, are we talking about the laity as ministers? I am not sure if anyone at that point could have possibly anticipated the following twenty-five years of development, but the question certainly indicates that the problem had surfaced at that time. One chapter of this publication also deals with the question of ordination and its relationship to the sacraments. The author takes a very firm stand:

ordination is historically and theologically and necessarily tied to the administration of the sacraments. The question of the priesthood of all believers is also raised: does the priesthood of all believers, as being mentioned and discussed in our denomination, mean in fact the profanation of all ministries? (p. 78)

These questions and others were presented to a Committee to Study the Ministry, which was to report in 1964. Their mandate was the following: "Study the ministry of the Methodist Church in the light of historic Christianity for the purpose of clarifying the doctrine of the church in relation to its ministry and as bearing on the proper use of terms, such as 'minister,' 'pastor,' 'ordination' [including the ordination of local preachers, the status of local preachers], administration of the sacraments, the relation of supply pastors to the annual conference [that is to say, the question of full membership in conference], the responsibilities of ministry, careers properly included in the ministerial office and offices to which episcopal appointments may be made [those are code words that deal with the question of special appointments], problems of recruitment and the most effective use of our ministerial manpower."[6]

This study committee explained in its report that the concept of an ordained laity is indefensible, while at the same time it recognized that the Methodist Church in fact had an ordained laity (p. 28). It went on to say that within our tradition, ordination is not definition; ordination does not define the essence of ministry (p. 31). This tension that had been in evidence within the church at that time for nearly fifty years was somewhat resolved by the 1964 report and its reaction to those issues in the assertion that the term minister should be reserved for those who are ordained and in full connection (pp. 33–34). The question of ***when*** one becomes a minister (when one is ordained? or when one is brought into full connection? or some time in between?) was resolved by the assertion that being ordained and being brought into full connection are in fact simultaneous ecclesial acts (p. 52). The problem then of having to be ordained before being brought into full connection and having to be in full connection before being ordained was therefore, by definition, resolved. Full connection and ordination are "simultaneous ecclesial acts."

The commission went on to propose, on the basis of its study, that the Methodist Church should have ***one*** ordained ***order***, that of elder. Further, it should have ***one*** office—unordained ***office***, that is—of deacon. Additionally, those persons previously known as "supply pastors" should be more explicitly defined as "lay pastors." After having carefully distinguished between the ***order*** of elder and the ***office*** of deacon, the report to the floor confused the issue by noting that "in the end, all ministerial ***orders*** are ***offices***."[7] This strange incongruity between the study and its presentation is only one of a number of problems evident in 1964.

The report of 1964 was not accepted by the General Conference, which by that time was anticipating union with the Evangelical United Brethren and felt that any major steps in the matter of ministry should be held over until discussions with the Evangelical United Brethren could be brought to fruition at the uniting conference. Therefore, the General Conference voted nonconcurrence with the report. In fact, Bishop Cannon, who was on the Committee to Study the Ministry, was the chair of the legislative committee. Therefore, his strong words at the outset asking the General Conference to support the report are in odd contrast to his report from the legislative committee of their non-concurrence as a result of a close vote (43–41 for a substitute recommendation).[8] The General Conference followed the legislative committee's recommendation to establish a new study commission for the following

quadrennium to consider both the majority report as it came to the 1964 conference *and* the minority opinion. The new study was to consider primarily the theological issues relating to ministry and the matter of merger with the Evangelical United Brethren.[9]

In 1966 at the special conference in Chicago, the study committee made a preliminary report which by and large said that we are working together to develop a unified view of ministry. The only actual significant legislation relative to that process was a proposal to change the constitution to allow the committee more flexibility in its discussion. The proposal was to change the phrase "traveling preacher in full connection" to "effective full-time ministerial member" because this change would allow the committee more flexibility.[10] It is interesting that what is lost in such a change are two of the key historic terms, "traveling preacher" and "full connection"—what is lost in that change are the basic concepts of *itinerancy* and *connectionalism*! Nevertheless, that tentative change was felt to be necessary at that time.

The report in 1968 that was brought to the Uniting General Conference was a careful and comprehensive study, and took into consideration a wide variety of views. With regard to the question of orders and sacraments, the report tied together the concepts of ministry (I should say ministers), the sacraments, and ordination: only a minister may administer the sacrament; the minister must, therefore be ordained. Walter Muelder emphasized in the discussion on the floor of the conference that there is a fundamental distinction between laity and ordained clergy, that this distinction is related precisely to the question of the administration of the sacraments, and that this distinction is "absolutely fundamental."[11] No one should administer the sacraments without ordination. Lay pastors (new terminology for "approved supply pastors") were, therefore, not authorized to administer the sacraments. Ordination signifies the ***authorization*** from the ordained ministry of the annual conference. The study committee was convinced that this approach was altogether consistent with the understanding of what ordination is, and they saw it as putting the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren (as they were joining together in the United Methodist Church) in an ecumenical stance that made it possible to discuss intelligently the question of ordination with other churches.[12] With the adoption of this report, the church (at least for the following quadrennium) prevented unordained local pastors from administering the sacraments—the first time such a situation existed (to my knowledge) since 1926 in the South and 1939 in the unified church.

Another interesting comment that comes from the report of 1968 has to do with the status of Evangelical United Brethren pastors who were not ordained elders but who would qualify in the new church as "associate members" (another new term) with deacon's orders. The terminology used here is informative: a deacon's ordination was seen as ***terminal*** ordination.[13] Although it sounds strangely like a terminal disease, terminal here is meant to indicate permanent orders at that level.

The 1968 report was basically adopted by the legislative committee and passed on to the Conference. In the midst of a lively debate on an amendment touching on the theology of ordination, Walter Muelder, speaking from the floor of the session, objected that the job of the General Conference was to write ***legislation***, not ***theology***, and that the Conference should not spend its time with twelve hundred people trying to "write a theology of ordination and correct it from the floor."[14] His point was well made, from a practical point of view: a General Conference

cannot write a consistent theology of ministry or ordination in a floor debate.

The 1968 conference accepted the report; as you know, the United Methodist Church retained two orders. In retrospect, one might note that Methodism passed up a prime opportunity to adopt a single order of ministry, a move that many had anticipated would be proposed at the Uniting Conference since it was the structure of ministry in the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The report as it went to the Conference, however, proposed two orders and also tried to distinguish very carefully between ordained and lay positions in the church. In receiving and accepting the report, the General Conference also established the Ministerial Education Fund, an important step ahead in the support of seminary education.

The report to the 1972 General Conference focused primarily upon theological education, the recruitment, nurture, and continuing education of the ministry; the best utilization and deployment of theological schools; and the appropriate promotional and administrative structure for the advancement of the church's ministry.[15] It developed the basic administrative structure that led to what is familiar to us today: the Board of Higher Education and Ministry with three divisions; at that point, Ordained Ministry, Lay Ministry, Chaplains and Related Ministries. The report did ask for a continuing study of ministry that would evaluate the geographic distribution and use of the seminaries, look at the question of continuing education, special appointments, enlistment of women in ministry, and examine the meaning of ordination and the covenant relationship (conference membership).[16]

The report of the 1976 commission marks a radical shift in the church's view of ministry. Two new elements are highlighted for the first time: the concepts of "general ministry" and "representative ministry."[17] The report "attempts a theological definition both of the general ministry and of the ordained ministry, showing thereby their inherent relationship and interdependence, yet at the same time delineating their distinctiveness."[18] In a remarkable turnaround from the sentiment of the previous decade, the commission proposed that the use of the word "ministry" as being particularly or even predominantly identified with those who are ordained was indefensible from the standpoint of our accepted theological standards (which had been defined four years earlier as scripture, tradition, reason, and experience).[19] Ministry was said to be in the name of Jesus Christ, whether carried out by clergy or laity. This broader conceptualization of ministry was grounded in baptism and confirmation, as rites of entry into ministry (supposedly in keeping with the idea of the priesthood of all believers).[20] Thus, in a brief span of eight years, the loudest voices in the commission and at General Conference shifted from talking about ministry as being valid only in the light of ordination to talking about ministry as being open to all in the light of their baptism.

The basic concern at that point was to include somehow within the conception of ministry all those who serve the church in professional ministries, both lay and ordained. The phrase "representative ministry" was coined to designate two categories of ministry within the general ministry of all Christians: diaconal ministers, called to ministries of service, and ordained ministers, called to specialized ministries of Word, Sacrament, and Order. Ordained ministers are representative *of* the entire ministry of Christ and *of* the ministry required of the entire church to the world.[21] In this report, the longtime tension between authoritarian and democratic tendencies in Methodism surfaces and is generally resolved in favor of the latter at nearly every turn.

The 1976 report notes that the ordained ministry is defined by its intentionally representative character (cf. earlier statement). Ordination is seen as "that act by which the Church symbolizes a *shared relationship* between those ordained for sacramental and functional leadership and the Church community from which the person being ordained has come." Now it is "this *relationship*" that is "a gift which comes through the grace of God."[22] At every opportunity, the point is repeated that there is no rivalry between the general and representative orders of ministry and that neither is subservient to the other: "The validity [!] of the mission of the Church is dependent on the viable interaction of the general ministry and the ordained ministry of the Church."[23]

In this definition of the general ministry of the church, belief in ordination as an act of God is further eroded as the report redefines the Wesleyan question for those who are called to ordained ministry. While Wesley asked, "Have they gifts, as well as grace, for the work," the commission believes that persons being considered for ordination should "be able to give evidence of the possession of gifts, *graces*, and promise of future usefulness."[24] The addition of the single letter *s* to the word grace makes all the difference in the world. A divine gift has thereby become cultivated manners! Although the corruption of the Wesleyan question was introduced into the 1960 Discipline of the Methodist Church in the licensing of local preachers, its inclusion in this report as a qualification for ordination works to devalue belief in ordination as an act of God.

Besides this concern for defining and positioning general ministry, the commission reflected a growing concern for recognition of unordained persons who serve the church on a full-time professional basis as part of the ministry of the church. Many of these persons were seen as powerless, having no participation in annual conference, and beset with such practical problems as benefits and pensions.[25] This need for empowerment was met in the short run by the designation of an office of diaconal minister, into which persons were consecrated for ministries of love, justice, and service. It was thought that these persons would be those in the professions (counseling, law, social service) whose ministries would benefit from some authorization from the church. The result was to have both an order of deacon and an office of diaconal minister, a confusing situation that was not directly addressed by the Conference.

On the other matters designated to its agenda, the commission suggested that special appointments be clarified in terms of categories of service (there has always been a certain amount of suspicion on the part of clergy in the annual conferences that people with special appointments are somehow getting away with something). As for women in ministry, the report suggested that recruitment be emphasized and that fairness be exhibited in such matters as examining women for ordination. It also recommended that ordained women be included in all the structures of the church.[26]

On the surface, the most startling recommendation made by this commission was that no commission be appointed by General Conference to study the ministry. It was, as a matter of fact, one of the most crucial political maneuvers in the long history of ministry studies, for this commission did actually call for a study of the diaconate to be made by a joint committee of the BHEM and BGM (DLM).[27] This "in-house" study was weighted from the beginning toward the diaconal interests: the committee was heavily representative of lay interests in the church, half of its membership from the lay division of the BGM and another quarter from the diaconal

ministries division of the BHEM. The mandate given the committee was to build upon the approved Guidelines for Recognition of Diaconal Ministry; to do further study to enable the church to move forward in establishing appropriate new structures for the enrichment of its ministry; to monitor progress being made in implementation of the 1976 legislation concerning diaconal ministry; and to report to the 1980 General Conference.

The language of the 1980 report heightens the tendencies begun in 1976 to shift away from traditional conceptualizations of ministry, ordination, and even sacraments. New ideas flow almost too easily with a rhetorical flourish. There is, for instance, the "primacy of general ministry": "The United Methodist heritage in all of its forms has recognized consistently in its practical life and theology the primacy of the ministry of all believers"—a statement that should make historians blink twice.[28] But there is also, as seen in the report, the "primacy of service": "Serving the needs of all of God's creatures, in Christ's name, constitutes the primary outward and visible sign (sacrament) of God's redemptive presence in the world."[29] Not only does this statement represent an innovative and questionable designation of "sacrament" (seen also in the context of "the sacramental character of all ministry") but the linkage of "primacy of service" (within the general ministry) with the Greek term for service (*diakonia*, sometimes translated as "servanthood") must be seen as an important tactical step in the politicization of scripture to support specific empowerment issues within the structure of the church. The political tensions that lay behind the "empowerment" issues, are evidenced by in the repetitive "non-hierarchical" "non-authoritatarian" emphases in this document.

The most radical proposal in the report was for a new *order* of diaconal minister. Whereas the previous Conference had provided for consecrated diaconal ministers in ministries of service and ordained ministers in specialized ministries of Word, Sacrament, and Order, this report tried to define both ministries in the same terminology: two specialized ministries within the representative ministry, both ordained to particular functions. The elder (ordained to responsibilities primarily for Word, Sacrament, and Order) would have a ministry of leadership within the congregation; the diaconal minister (ordained to responsibilities primarily for Service, Justice, and Love) would have a ministry of service in the world. The report inaccurately describes the historic order of ordained "deacon" as a "temporary" order and suggests that it could be abandoned.[30]

The way in which strained cleverness with words often results in confusion of thoughts can be seen in the variety of ways the term "representative ministry" is explained: "the calling and intention to present again (re-present) the calling of God to the whole people"; "intending to represent the whole gospel *and* the whole people of God." Leadership is described almost entirely in terms of facilitating; the terms used are revealing: ministry is to enable, embody, exemplify, intensify, and make more effective. Ordination is watered down to consist of "symbolic acts which confer special roles of responsibility." A significant shift away from acknowledging the divine empowerment of ministry is indicated by what may or may not have been intentional alteration of the Wesleyan question, "Have they gifts, as well as grace, for the work...." When applied to diaconal ministers in the 1980 report, this became "Have they gifts, as well as *graces*, for their work...."[31] Wesleyan language about "setting apart" is used in the report as part of the rationale for ordination of diaconal ministers; Wesley himself, though, had no problem "setting apart" his lay preachers without ordination.

The report was so laden with problems that the legislative committee that received the report at General Conference in 1980 unanimously recommended non-concurrence. Accepting instead a BHEM document, the legislative committee recommended that diaconal ministers continue to be consecrated and be allowed lay membership in annual conference (using, if necessary, the lay equalization plan). The language of the study report regarding representative ministry and specialized ministries was shifted slightly in the recommended proposals, and the rationale for diaconal ministry, problematic as it may have been, was incorporated into the legislation that was finally accepted by the Conference. The Conference also voted to continue the study of ministry during the following quadrennium and asked that the three ministry divisions work together (as well as consult with appropriate general agencies) to develop recommendations that would reflect a "holistic understanding and ordering of ministry" with specific response to a permanent diaconate in the UMC.[32]

The study committee for the 1980–84 quadrennium was again made up of a minority of representatives from the Division of Ordained Ministry. Over two thirds of the committee were representatives from the Division of Diaconal Ministry, the Division of Chaplains and Related Ministries, and at-large members.[33] Following the suggestion of the mandate, the committee developed a set of recommendations that were sent to the Divisions for study in October 1982. Over the next few months, the committee prepared revised recommendations, which were passed by a minority of 9 votes (out of 19; 4 absent, 3 abstaining, 3 against), and sent to the BHEM in October 1983. The following statements reflect the nature of the final report: there should be one order of elder (for Word, Sacrament, and Order); there should be one order of deacon (for Word and Service); the "transitional" deacon should be eliminated. Descriptive terms for diaconal ordination were changed in the last report from "Word and Service" to "Liturgy, Service, and Justice."[34]

The wording and tone of the 1984 report echo its predecessor in 1980. The general ministry is again emphasized as the *basic* ministry of the church; the representative ministry is in and for the basic ministry, embodies the church in the world, and has two non-hierarchical forms differentiated by representative roles, functions, and means of accountability (the distinctions of function not intending to indicate distinctions of dignity, status, or worth). The representative ministry is a special ministry, identified by special gifts, graces (!), fruits, and promise of usefulness.[35]

There is some problem in knowing just what representative means; it seems to mean everything and therefore nothing. The special ministry is representative of Christ (!), of the whole church, of the entire community of Christ, of the Gospel; special ministry represents to the church its identity with Christ and the Gospel itself.[36] Ordination is no longer associated with the sacraments or preaching, but rather is an ordination "for mission": the act "has different intentions according to the tasks and functions of the representative ministers."[37] Presumably, if a church administrator is ordained as a diaconal minister, he or she is ordained to administering. The increase of concern for promoting "mission" in unconventional ways seems in some ways to run the risk of losing sight of the conventional ways (again the language is of equipping, enabling...).

The problems in this report were essentially the same as those in the report rejected by the General Conference in 1980, and this report met a similar fate, being turned down in the legislative committee by an overwhelming vote of 84 to 24.[38] A minority report by four members of the committee then became the majority report

of the legislative committee (by about the same margin of vote). It stipulated that the diaconal ministry be retained in its current form (as set up in 1976); that the church consider broadening the deaconate to include three types of deacons (those intending to seek elder's orders, those intending to remain as deacons in pastoral ministry; those intending to serve in ministries of love, service, and justice); and that an instrument for ongoing reflection on the theology of the church and ministry be established and report to each session of the General Conference.[39] Our present meeting, though not directly a result of that last suggestion, is certainly in keeping with that spirit.

A new study committee was established through the Council of Bishops to report to the 1988 General Conference. The mandate stipulated that it study specifically the meaning of ordination, the relationship of ordination to the sacraments, the meaning of itinerancy and the nature of conference membership; that it deal with current orders of ministry and the possibility of a permanent diaconate; that it consider all studies of ministry made since 1968.[40] The make-up of the committee is typically representative in the recent mode of quota-recognition (which at times seems to be more important than expertise in these days of caucus-Christianity). The problems in the current draft of the report seem in some instances to reflect some confusion that could naturally result within the particular constellation of influences represented on the committee.

One should acknowledge that the current plan of the committee is to present only a tentative report and ask for continued study for another quadrennium. I would say that this maneuver is the result of the negative reaction from around the church to yet another report that essentially starts and ends at the same places as the last two reports that have both been rejected by the General Conference. Some of the problems in the report can be seen in the wording of specific sentences as published in the *Circuit Rider*:[41] "Everything the church is and does is 'ministry'—service to God and the world." Ordained ministers "represent Christ to the community and the ministry of all the People of God to the world...to them is given the task of publicly presenting and representing those events, authorities and powers which are essential to the ongoing life of the Church." Ordained ministers "represent the Gospel of Christ" "to remind the entire People of their commission." "The ordained ministry is sacramental to the Church as the Church itself is sacramental to the world." "There is also the matter of harmony rather than hierarchy." "Lay persons who are further called to particular, representative service in the church and are ordained, also continue their responsibility for the ministry common to all Christians to which they were called at baptism." "Ordained ministry may be called representative in at least two ways: —the intention to present again (re-present) the calling and acts of God in Christ to the whole people, re-presenting to the Church its own identity and mission in Jesus Christ; —the visible and intentional representation of the general ministry of all baptized Christians, focusing the ministry of all the people of God to the world, and intensifying and effectuating the calling and self-understanding of all God's people as servants (ministers) in Christ's name." "To speak of embodying is to state that the church sets aside those who will intentionally 're-present' to the community that distinct part of its identity and purpose." "Deacons shall be lay members of the annual conference upon their ordination." "Deacons may be licensed as Local Pastors to administer the sacraments in the charges to which they are assigned."

Many of the concepts are less than clear and in fact point toward real problems of understanding: ordination is a sacramental act; Baptism is a mandate for

servanthood; the Eucharist in a mandate for ministry; the church must continually reform the ordering of ministry; horizontal relationships are more important than vertical relationships.

Many of the problems of the last three reports can be summarized in several questions raised on the floor of General Conference in 1984 by James Logan and John F. Walker.[42] The essence of these was as follows: In the attempt to relate the sacrament of Baptism and the act of ordination within the concept of ministry, does the proposal *inflate* the category of permanent diaconate to the point of *conflating* it with the baptism of all Christians in the general ministry? What ever happened to lay leadership within a meaningful theology of the laity? Does not a diaconal order based on service undermine the ministry of all Christians? What is representative ministry actually representative *of* or *to*? If ordination and itineration are both intended to facilitate mission, why does the proposal have only one order itinerate? Does not a non-itinerating conference relation change the nature of annual conference relations and episcopal responsibility (just ask Joshua Soule)? Is it fair or even correct to refer to the traditional order of deacon as "temporary" or "transitional" (much less the proposed diaconal order as "permanent")? Two or three other observations made in the discussion at that time also seem pertinent: The report, lacking a global dimension, seems to be insensitive to the UMC outside of the United States. Adoption of the report would seem to short-circuit ecumenical discussions that are still underway. Ordination is not the proper way to recognize lay persons who serve the church, nor is it what many diaconal ministers themselves want—"We asked for rights, and we got orders as an answer."

In conclusion, I would like to present my own analysis and summary of the nature and cause of what seems to me to be a very confusing state of affairs in some very crucial areas of concern in our church. On the matter of ***number of orders***, for the first decade after 1944, the studies maintained and defended the traditional scheme of two orders, as well as holding the line on the necessary connection between ministry, sacraments, and ordination; the studies focused on maintaining high standards (educational and personal) and promoting recruitment and support of ministry. The next decade saw a shift toward restructuring ministry on the basis of proposing one order (elder), partly in anticipation of union between the Methodists and the Evangelical United Brethren. The third decade, after 1964, abandoned the idea of one order and moved rapidly toward a democratization of ministry and a reconceptualization of orders within the prevailing temper of non-authoritative and non-hierarchical tendencies of the 1970s. In the 1980s, the reports have continued the attempt to unravel the relationship between ordination and sacraments and to suggest that the lay diaconate become an order. The most recent study commission, as I understand it, has considered moving beyond these two orders and was thinking of proposing three orders (including an ordained episcopate). It is difficult to gain a sense of continuity within our tradition when, on the basic matter of ministerial orders, in a period of twenty years we move from advocating one order to contemplating three. In spite of much of the rhetoric to the contrary, some of the emerging views of ministry are often tied more to function and facility than to vision, commitment, or vocation.

At the beginning of these reports, the need to establish positive ecumenical relationships was seen as the rationale for maintaining two traditional orders of ministry. By the 1960s, however, these broader relationships (including our European connection and our talks with the Evangelical United Brethren) were seen as reasons we should be thinking in terms of one order. As we approach 1988, the

same rationale (ecumenical viability) is being touted as a reason we should perhaps be thinking of three orders!

There has been a great deal of waffling back and forth on the matter of the ***nature and purpose of ordination***. The matter of orders as distinguished from offices has never been made clear in any official statement. The clarity in the earlier reports in distinguishing between clergy and laity on the basis of ordination has now been significantly clouded by the emphasis on general ministry into which one is "ordained" by baptism. And the connection between ordination and the sacraments, already a problem at the outset of these studies, has been alternately clarified, confused, clarified, disregarded, and has generally fallen victim to practical and political pressures quadrennium by quadrennium. A return to the traditional requirement of ordination for anyone who would administer the sacrament was not only short-lived, but was reversed to the extent that lay administration (under certain minimal restrictions) has become commonplace. Whether ordination is essentially a gift of God or a rite of the Church has been voted back and forth by more than one General Conference. Ordination as the mark of a clear distinction between laity and clergy was certain for the first two decades of this period, but that clarity disappeared into the fogginess of representative ministry.

The confusion of starting points between what a minister *is* and what a minister *does* is paralleled in a confusing ***doctrine of the church***. This attempt to elucidate a doctrine falls short of the wisdom of what the church *is* (which helps define what it does) or with what the church *does* (which then defines what the church *is*). One point of confusion is in a shift away from the concept of Church as fellowship of believers in which the Word is preached and the Sacraments duly administered (a community of grace in and through which appropriate actions consequential to its nature take place) toward a concept of the Church *as* mission (a community shaped by the actions it takes necessary to meet the needs of the time and place, those actions then defining the nature of the gathered community). Additionally confusing is recent talk about the church as ***being*** "sacrament" to the world, in terms of it being an "outward and visible sign" (of the fruits and ***graces*** of ministry?) presumably of God's grace (the similarity in wording to the traditional definition of sacrament overshadowing the omission of the last half of that definition: "of an inward and spiritual grace" [***grace***, after all, has become so meaningless as to be shifted to "graces" without the batting of an editorial eyelash]).

Finally, we seem to have become more interested in rhetoric and image than substance and meaning. Many key ***words*** that are basic to a clear understanding of the church have become nearly meaningless in the process. In the process of draining many words of any distinctive significance, other words take on special alternative significance because they have become symbols of party issues, and therefore have in essence become tools of power struggles, and are thus unable to convey any intrinsic meaning. Some words such as "ministry" have been used in so many specific contexts (sliding back and forth between a specific and a general meaning and sometimes used interchangeably in both ways) that the term has become nearly meaningless in terms of its derivative, "minister." The term "representative" ("representative ministry") might seem to be clear in many of its separate and specific applications, but looking at the whole picture, one wonders how ministry can in the end be representative *of* everything and *to* everything. The term "sacrament" ("the church is sacrament") is now falling into that familiar bin of favorite words that can be weighted with different and special new meanings so as to broaden their usability. But the terms then become less useful in designating

traditional meanings within an understandable context. Some terms, such as "confessional" ("we are not a confessional church"), are at times given particularly narrow uses, so that one has to know the specific hermaneutical framework in the mind of the user to understand the meaning. And some quite central words in the tradition, such as "Lord", have become the focal point of party contentions. Terms become heavy with latter-day connotations that can be used to obscure their primary meanings in a cloud of contention. One difficulty in elucidating a clear doctrine of the church and its ministry becomes apparent in the history of a process that has begun to rely on the parochialized special uses of words and terms that are packed, stretched, and finally squeezed out of the arena of consensual usefulness.

We could also point out that an increasingly significant part of the ecclesiastical ambiance within which many of these developments have taken place has been the burgeoning influence of pastoral care approaches to many areas in the church from educational methods to leadership training. We are so desirous of harmony, so afraid of hierarchical tendencies, so inclined to be non-directive, and wanting so much to facilitate, to embody, to heal, to enable, to lead from behind, and to see it all from the underside, that no one wants to provide any real leadership or is willing to make firm, responsible decisions. We are in dire need of good leadership, but in many of our official actions and statements, we exhibit an implicit understanding of organization and administration in which strong leadership is by nature seen as oppressive, hierarchical, fascist, discriminatory, or capricious, and therefore to be avoided at all costs. And many times the resulting cost of avoiding strong leadership is very high. We do have capable laity and clergy in the church. We simply do not trust them to do anything, say anything, or even make a decision without asking us first. And it is rather ironic that, at a time when many are complaining about us being clergy-dominated institution, we hear a proposal to recognize outstanding lay workers by creating a new class of clergy.

When this penchant for democracy is combined with a tendency for American experimental pragamatism to prevail in any discussion of how to proceed ("I like it, let's try it; if it works, it must be right!"), one can see how doctrine takes on the appearance of an occasional and ancillary enterprise. Theology and history become relegated to the role of being used as handy tools for retrospective rationalization rather than basic methodological resources that stand behind the development of policies and programs. In many ways, these developments seem to demonstrate the increasing influence of those theologies that start with issues of power and politics and try to derive a theological (if not biblical) rationale to support partisan issues and pressures. At times, it seems as though administrative problems of staff relationships are being confused with theologies of ministry and mission; there is room yet for a good theology of polity, but there is also a need for good administrative structure and know-how.

It is easy in this context to blame the process by which our church proceeds in its attempts at official self-understanding and operation. Nearly everything is up for grabs every four years at General Conference. And given the increasingly large and diverse nature of our church, the possibility of focussed concerns and real unity seems to fade farther into the background behind the activities of pressure groups and specific interest groups. The political realities of our situation are often mirrored in the membership of significant committees, and the outcome of some committee deliberations naturally tend to reflect the makeup of the committee.

In the whole constitutional and legislative process of governing our church, where is

theology done? I can sense that it really does not happen in the quadrennial study committees. The activities in those groups are most often characterized by careful jockeying for position, in which theology is sometimes used as the handmaid of politics. As Walter Muelder pointed out in 1968, the theological work cannot be expected to take place on the floor of the General Conference itself. The boards and agencies are perhaps more rightfully concerned with implementing than theologizing. The local churches and annual conferences certainly don't exhibit a continuing interest in pursuing serious theological reflection. Where, in the structure of the church then, is theology done? Many of the calls for reports ask that a theological rationale be provided in the final report. Sometimes the mandate even includes a request that decisions be tested by the Wesleyan guidelines of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, a particularly intriguing dilemma since there seems to be little common agreement as to how these are supposed to function authoritatively within our theological methodology. In the midst of this somewhat troubling picture of our theological dilemma (if not to say doctrinal wasteland), I would suggest that the European Theological Study Commission represents in my experience one of the few bright lights of hope for serious reflection on basic issues that must be of concern to the church. We must give thought to ways in which this kind of endeavor can be expanded without being trivialized or politicized.

I would also suggest that the legislative processes of the General Conference itself could be adjusted to accommodate two basic concerns that have become evident to me in this study—the need for meaningful levels of ***continuity*** and ***consensus*** in our basic self-understanding and the structures that reflect our identity. A church that attempts to change its structures every four years, especially in such basic areas as ministry, seems to lack the basic concern for continuity that might provide some of the strength that it seems so wistfully to desire. And although a diverse group such as ours can never hope for total unity on any given issue, an intentional concern for converging toward consensus might go a long way toward that "unity in diversity" that we would all like to celebrate. We need a way to keep major proposals from being decimated and treated piecemeal if we are to prevent the essential nature of our church from disappearing under continual layers of quadrennially-applied bandaids. The Book of Discipline in this sense simply reflects the confusion that is promoted by the present process. Without claiming a definitive answer to the problem, I would venture to propose several guidelines that might be helpful in this regard:

1. Require that major proposals (on ministry, doctrinal guidelines, etc.) must be dealt with as a whole, as reported by the committee; the report could not be voted on piecemeal, but must be voted up or down as a whole.

2. Require that a final vote on any such report could come only at the following General Conference, after a four-year study within the church; such a "second reading" policy is not unusual within many polities for important issues.

3. Require that the approval of such proposals finally requires a two-thirds majority; even if not a constitutional issue, such significant issues should represent more of a consensus than 50% plus one.

I make these suggestions with the simple intention of trying to stimulate thinking on ways by which we as a denomination could be more intentional in our concern for continuity and consensus in our dealing with basic issues, be they structural,

theological, or missional. I would be encouraged, even refreshed, by discussions within our denomination that struggled with basic theological issues, for I am convinced that we must know what ministry is (and what the church is) before we can know what the church must do. We must understand the nature of the church and its ministry before we can have an effective and meaningful mission.

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NOTES

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3. ***Daily Christian Advocate***, hereinafter cited as *DCA* (April 28, 1956), pp. 17–24 (137–44).

4. *DCA* (May 1, 1956), p. 30 (250).

5. (Nashville: Board of Education, 1960), 143 pp.

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8. Ibid., p. 741.

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10. *DCA* (Nov. 11, 1966), p. 39 (935).

11. *DCA* (May 6, 1968), p. 67 (763).

12. *Journal* (1968), pp. 624–25.

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14. *DCA* (May 3, 1968), p. 21 (573).

15. *Journal* (1972), pp. 1711–31.

16. Ibid., pp. 1730–31.

17. "General ministry" was used by Fred Wertz in his report on the floor of the 1968 General Conference, but the report itself had used the term "ministry of the baptized." *Journal* (1968), p. 624; *DCA* (Apr. 30, 1968), p. 55 (391).

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19. Ibid., p. 256.

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33. *DCA* (1984 Advance Ed.), p. E–22.
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35. Ibid., pp. E–23–24.
36. Ibid., pp. E–26–27.
37. Ibid., p. E–24.
38. *DCA* (May 8, 1984), p. 69 (453).
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